

2018 Annual Report

Hello Friends and Supporters of OCRA!

It has been a busy year for OCRA 2.0, OCRA's project to raise the funds and sponsor close relatives of our settled Syrian families who are living in extremely vulnerable, and increasingly dangerous, circumstances in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. This email reports on OCRA's activities this year, and is our annual request for donations (skip to the Heading "**Fundraising Request**"). We hope you will consider a donation. **Remember that donations of \$100 or over before December 31 to First United Church Ottawa, delivered to Pat Wilson at 164 Glebe Avenue, will qualify for charitable tax receipts and allow you to reduce your taxes!**

In this report we would like to sincerely thank our Honourary Chair, Paul Dewar, for his guidance, wisdom and participation in OCRA. Paul is an example of life well-lived. We salute him, and without minimizing the daunting challenge of his illness, wish him happiness, moments of joy, and the best company of friends and family in the journey ahead. We are in your corner.

OCRA's Settled Families

At home here in Canada, our settled families are progressing! Some have jobs (1 at a grocery, 1 driving for Uber/ Lyft, 1 at a hair salon and 1 at an auto shop), 2 others are investing fulltime in improving their English to qualify for work in truck driving and food vending, and 1 is volunteering in office settings to get job ready. One will be completing the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at Algonquin this month (our first Graduation!) will also do part-time work, and has been accepted to the Police Foundation course there. Another is completing his high school at Algonquin. And two others (women!) are enrolling in the EAP this January. The EAP is an intensive English training course with an emphasis on job and academic readiness. If completed successfully, it acts as the English prerequisite for any course at Algonquin.

It is interesting to note that all who are working are also continuing with English Language training because it is clear that increased proficiency in English will better their employment opportunities. And all the OCRA women with pre-school kids have obtained daycare so that they too can attend English classes. Finally, Ayda Noufour's Yasmin Syrian Cooking (<https://yasminsyriancookingottawa.ca/>) is not to be missed. It continues to employ refugee women and deliver mouth-watering, simply delicious Syrian food at reasonable prices. You should not miss the chance to experience their catering!

New BVOR Family

In 2018, OCRA formed FSG 14 and welcomed a new BVOR family! The BVOR program is similar to the OCRA 1.0 sponsorships, where the government makes refugees referred to Canada by UNHCR available to be sponsored privately, on a 50-50% funding basis. The Abdurhaman family (Dad, Mom and 3 daughters) from Eritrea arrived on December 6, 2018. The first busy weeks of settlement are proceeding

well, and at a quick pace. **We want to thank the people who have contacted OCRA to give in-kind donations. Because of you, this family has the basics to build a future in their new country and home.** We have a terrific family support group of 21 people composed of people who worked with OCRA 1.0 families, but the majority FSG members are new OCRA volunteers! **I am not bashful to say that OCRA has an enduring and positive presence in the community, and this is what has enabled us to attract excellent volunteers to help the families we settle!**

We are working to see if we can help this family locate and retrieve their 14 year old son, who was separated from them when they fled across the border to Ethiopia, and has been unable to cross since then. We have a “One Year Window” during which he can come to Canada, subject to security and medical checks, if we can reach him, get him out and get a completed application done. If anyone has expertise in Eritrea – Ethiopia border matters, your advice would be very welcome.

We were able to obtain our 50% of the funding for this sponsorship from the BVOR Fund (Shapiro and Radcliffe Foundations), and we thank them for their generosity.

Sponsorship Applications Progress

Thanks to the generosity of OCRA supporters in 2017 and during 2018 so far, we raised sufficient funds to file **four sponsorship applications** with First United Church Ottawa and the United Church of Canada in 2018. Lots of work went into the preparation of the sponsorship applications, all of which required very detailed background information and information about the journeys out of Syria and the fleeing from the bombing inside Syria. The information obtained from our OCRA 2.0 sponsored families was harrowing and heart wrenching. It is completely understandable, knowing these stories, why our settled families fear for their loved ones, particularly those who fled to countries that cannot support a refugee population and that are threatening repatriation of the refugees from Syria who they once took in.

Three of the four applications that we filed in 2018 got spots in the 2018 private sponsorship quota allocated to the United Church of Canada, passed the first stage of review (the sponsorship finances and settlement plans) and are now being processed by the Canadian government offices overseas in Beirut and Amman. The fourth application is waiting for a space allocation from the government, but is likely to be accepted for processing early in 2019.

In addition to the four applications, one OCRA 2.0 family has arrived this year, and the scene at the Ottawa airport was very moving for everybody in the arrivals area. The Alqadri family, sponsored by OCRA Family Support Group 3, is well settled now, with their boys in school and the parents in English classes, but their joy at being reunited with their family here has given real purpose to their efforts to integrate and build a future in Canada.

Fundraising Request

OCRA 2.0 has been working hard to raise funds for a sixth family, again a close relative of one of our settled groups. We held the annual OCRA Garage Sale, and managed to raise over \$3,300 despite the persistent downpour! And we have also been working to raise funds throughout the year. A sincere thank you to all recipients of this email who have already contributed!

This sixth family is a single mom with three children, currently in very vulnerable circumstances in Jordan. Jordan is threatening to repatriate Syrians, and the young man in this family would be jailed on his return for having fled the country without doing his military service. We have currently raised 40% towards the funds needed, and are working to raise \$16,000 to complete the funding for this sponsorship. Any amount you can provide will help us bring this family to join their relatives, and save them from the hopeless circumstances they now endure.

As was the case last year, amounts over \$100 will qualify for a tax receipt if they are provided by cheque to First United Church Ottawa and sent to Pat Wilson at 164 Glebe Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 2C5. Please put OCRA in the description line.

You can also contribute on-line with a few convenient clicks, at <http://refugeeaction.ca/donate/>

Please note that we cannot provide tax receipts for amounts contributed on-line.

We are honoured to continue to volunteer with OCRA in re-uniting refugee families. Doing this work, including the all-important raising of funds, is an antidote to the division and populist anger about immigrants growing amongst us, and allows each person who contributes to have a direct, significant and meaningful impact on a refugee's chance for a future.

We hope you will consider a donation as part of your charitable giving this year.

May you all have the best of the season, and a wonderful time with family and friends over the holidays, and the very best to each for a Happy and Healthy New Year!

Patricia Wilson, OCRA Co-ordinator

Tanya Lary, Treasurer

P.S. If you have read this far, here is a video OCRA made for Canada Day this year about Khaled Agha, a young Syrian who came to Canada in February 2016 under an OCRA sponsorship. In the video, Khaled tells the story of his arrival and settlement, based on a speech he wrote himself for a Parliamentary dinner attended by the Minister of Immigration. Khaled made everyone in

the room cry. The video, like all our work, was created by our volunteers one day in late June when we went up to Parliament Hill. We hope you like it.

<https://youtu.be/Yzot9INT0xg>